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NGA Review  
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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

7 October 1985

ANGOLA: Implications Of Government Military Offensive [redacted]

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**Summary**

In this year's annual offensive against UNITA insurgents, Angolan forces--buttressed by a closer Soviet advisory role and increased use of Soviet-supplied aircraft--demonstrated significantly improved military performance. UNITA experienced its first significant military reverse since beginning a push in 1982 to expand operations and secure more territory beyond its traditional strongholds in the southeast. In our judgment, in contrast to last year's failed offensive, more direct and extensive Soviet advisory involvement in planning and directing Angolan combat operations, together with extensive use of tactical air support for the first time, were key factors in Luanda's gains. Contributing to better performance are improvements over the past two years in training and organization of the Angolan armed forces that has allowed for

This memorandum was requested by Phillip Ringdahl, Director of African Affairs, National Security Council. It was prepared by [redacted] Central Africa Branch, of the Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Contributions were provided by [redacted] of the Office of Soviet Analysis. The paper was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division, [redacted]

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more effective exploitation of substantial Soviet arms delivered in late 1983 and throughout 1984. UNITA required major South African assistance and Pretoria appears to have intervened at least twice with heavy airstrikes around Mavinga to prevent deeper penetration of UNITA-held territory. [redacted]

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Luanda has been buoyed by its improved performance and probably believes that it can do as well in operations next year. For UNITA--knocked off stride but far from beaten--the offensive pointed out its relative weakness in a direct confrontation with a well-equipped conventional army. UNITA leader Savimbi probably will have to adjust his strategy, perhaps reverting to more classic guerrilla tactics and try to intensify the guerrilla war in central and northern Angola. For both UNITA and the Angolan government, the importance of their main foreign backers--the USSR and South Africa--seems likely to increase. [redacted]

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#### MPLA's Military Offensive This Year

Overview. With the exception of 1983, when UNITA's capture of Cangamba threw Luanda into disarray, the MPLA every year since 1977 has mounted an offensive in the dry season against UNITA without notable success. In our judgment, the military objectives of this year's offensive were roughly the same as those last year: to regain lost territory north and west of Savimbi's stronghold in southeastern Angola and if possible to capture Jamba, his headquarters. Since beginning the offensive last July, government forces have captured Cazombo--held by UNITA since late 1983 and abandoned in mid-September to superior forces--and nearly took Mavinga--300 kilometers northwest of Jamba--until driven back by apparently repeated South African airstrikes. In our view, both Cazombo and Mavinga are important to UNITA: the former because it gave control of a small portion of the border with Zaire and served as a support base for northern operations; the latter because it was the first town of any size to be captured and was the site of the 1982 UNITA party congress as well as a way station on UNITA's supply line to the north. [redacted]

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Government forces have been driven back from their second effort to capture Mavinga. Angolan forces were within 20 kilometers of the town in mid-September when a major South African airstrike on 16 September forced

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their withdrawal. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Luanda claims South Africa aircraft struck  
advancing government troops again on 30 September. [REDACTED]

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Angolan forces apparently are active elsewhere on the periphery of the UNITA-held territory, but there is scant information on the situation and neither UNITA nor Pretoria have commented on these secondary operations. [REDACTED] at least one Angolan brigade was moving toward Lucusse from Luena in mid-September, but an apparent UNITA ambush may have slowed its operations. [REDACTED]

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Despite the importance of defending the Mavinga and Cazombo theaters, there is no indication that UNITA has cut back on guerrilla operations throughout Angola or pulled back significant numbers of troops to help out during the current offensive. [REDACTED]

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Results So Far. In our judgment, whatever the next steps, Luanda comes away from this offensive with its best sustained performance yet against the insurgents. The Angolan Army has shown that it can penetrate UNITA-held territory, meet and overcome UNITA conventional forces in a standup battle, take positions defended by the insurgents, and sustain higher casualties. Unlike previous offensives where overall direction and control faltered, this year the operation apparently moved steadily ahead. [REDACTED]

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We believe UNITA--in its choice of tactics this year--may have been overconfident after three years of steady gains. Savimbi evidently discounted Soviet readiness to have their advisers become more directly involved in directing Angolan combat operations and Luanda's ability--with Cuban help--to field significant numbers of tactical aircraft this year. [REDACTED]

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What Next? There is no information to indicate the government has called off its offensive despite two rebuffs at Mavinga. We have noted in [REDACTED]

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the past that government offensives normally wind down in mid-October when the rainy season approaches and the weather and terrain give the seasonal advantage to the insurgents. [redacted]

[redacted] the rains have begun in Cazombo and are expected soon in the Mavinga area. [redacted] South Africa has recently cut back its air buildup in northern Namibia suggesting Pretoria believes the present danger to UNITA has diminished. [redacted]

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Luanda may decide to pull back from its present advanced positions to main garrisons at Luena and Menongue and take credit for a good performance with the expectation that Savimbi has been knocked off stride until the next government offensive. Angolan troops have been fighting for almost two months, casualties and combat losses probably have been heavy, and weapons and equipment have suffered from wear and tear. [redacted]

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Alternatively, Luanda may try to hold its gains through the rainy season as a spring board for operations next year. Angolan troops could dig in at Cazombo and at an advanced position between Cuito Cuanavale and Mavinga with the expectation they could be resupplied by air or with escorted truck convoys. [redacted]

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It is possible, but less likely in our view, that Luanda will continue the offensive through the rainy season. Even with fresh troops, Angolan forces would face increasing danger of becoming overextended, ambushed, or mired in the virtually trackless bush country. Luanda probably would have the best opportunities in the Cazombo region and possible could make some gains there. In the Mavinga region, however, we believe that any move to renew the offensive in the next few months would be complicated by weather conditions and probably would prompt additional South African counterstrikes. [redacted]

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### Behind the Offensive

Despite the failures of past offensives, we believe Luanda has been preoccupied with achieving a military success over the insurgents that could be portrayed as a sign that the tide had shifted in its favor. The alternative of a negotiated power-sharing arrangement with UNITA has long been publicly refused by the MPLA and is considered in private only by a small minority, generally when the government has been under extreme military pressure from UNITA. [redacted]

[redacted] the mood in Luanda was upbeat because UNITA had failed to make good on promises to carry its attacks into the capital. [redacted]

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The MPLA government apparently believes that ultimate victory over the insurgents could take a decade or more. Luanda [redacted]

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[ ] is pursuing a combined military-political strategy that it hopes will succeed in a protracted conflict. In addition to improving the military's performance, Luanda seeks to revitalize the party and reform the government administration to win the "hearts and minds" of the population. We believe the military's improved performance during this year's offensive will encourage it to move ahead with some overdue reforms during a scheduled party congress in mid-December. Luanda's long-term strategy for dealing with UNITA is supported by Moscow, which has always opposed Angolan participation in a US-sponsored negotiated solution to the conflict. [ ]

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### Soviet and Cuban Role

In our judgment, Angola's improved performance in this year's offensive is primarily the result of more direct and extensive Soviet advisory involvement in planning and directing Angola combat operations as well as extensive use for the first time of tactical air support. Contributing to better performance are improvements in the past two years in training and organization of the Angolan armed forces that has allowed the government to exploit its advantage in weaponry more effectively. (See Annex for details of military forces in the region.) [ ]

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The role of Angola's key backers has grown since August 1983, when UNITA took the town of Cangamba in a major defeat for Luanda that shocked the MPLA leadership, which requested more Communist military assistance, and catalyzed Moscow and Havana to provide it. We believe UNITA's advances challenged Moscow's credibility as an ally and military patron. Moreover, Angola's lack of military progress probably was viewed in Moscow as benefiting the position of those Angolans then favorable to the US-brokered regional negotiations. [ ]

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Soviet military assistance was immediately forthcoming and peaked in 1984 following delivery of over 100 fighters, fighter-bombers and helicopters, additional airdefense weapons, and various armored vehicles, artillery, and other material. Cuba sent about 5,000 more troops, raising its total military strength to roughly 35,000 men. Soviet aircraft delivered in 1984 reached the field in significant numbers only in mid-1985, [ ] and in the offensive this year, Luanda--supported by Cuban and a growing number of Angolan pilots--made extensive sustained use of tactical air support. [ ]

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Since 1984, Soviet advisers in Angola have been extensively involved in improving the organization, administration, and training of the Angolan Army. The Soviets apparently have also taken a more direct role in planning and directing Angolan combat operations, probably because the

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Angolan troops were slow to assimilate and effectively use the weapons previously provided by Moscow.

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The failure of the Angolans to competently prosecute the offensive in 1984, even though Luanda did not have the full use of Soviet aircraft delivered earlier in the year, probably led Moscow to conclude that a more direct Soviet role would be necessary. In Angola's offensive this year, Moscow apparently relaxed some of the restraints on its advisers--probably because of impatience with Angolan inability to carry out more complex maneuvers.

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planning for the current offensive probably began soon after the failure of the 1984 offensive. The fact that the government has managed to demonstrate improved military performance this year, however, may allow the Soviets to garner some indirect "East-West" benefits from events in Angola. For example, government successes could improve Soviet ability to portray themselves as defenders of a "legitimate" African regime against a South African government tied to the United States. Sustained government success could also improve Moscow's credibility as a reliable supporter of its clients. [redacted]

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Meanwhile the Cubans, as in previous Angolan operations, probably sent specialists--such as pilot, tankers, artillerymen, and communicators--forward to supplement Angolan troops in recent combat operations. UNITA officials say that no major Cuban ground combat force has participated in the offensive [redacted] no major Cuban combat force had deployed from the main garrisons they guard in the region. [redacted]

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#### South African Involvement

South Africa, apparently concerned by Luanda's progress in the current offensive, has increased its direct support to UNITA forces. Moreover, Pretoria has admitted publicly for the first time that it was providing materiel, humanitarian, and moral support to UNITA. Senior South African officials also took pains to emphasize the strength of Pretoria's ties to UNITA and the importance it assigns to common objectives in Angola. Pretoria probably is disappointed with UNITA's recent performance and decision not to pull back but instead stay and fight. Individual UNITA soldiers probably have fought hard, however. [redacted]

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In September, [redacted] an unusually high number of South African aircraft at Namibian airbases and indications of recent use of rough airstrips in UNITA-held territory. Pretoria announced on 16 September that it had launched an anti-SWAPO operation in southern Angola, a move that undoubtedly was intended to cover additional assistance to Savimbi and distract the Angolan concentration on the offensive against UNITA. Although Pretoria and UNITA apparently believed that Cazombo--too far to the north to be effectively reinforced or supported--was beyond saving and decided to abandon the town before capture, the situation at Mavinga probably was viewed as a more serious threat. In addition to the airstrike, we believe Pretoria also committed major elements of its 32nd "Buffalo" battalion (black expatriates that serve as Pretoria's "Foreign Legion") to back up UNITA forces defending Mavinga. [redacted]

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### Outlook

We doubt that either side expects a quick end to the ten-year old civil war. Indeed, the recent pattern of fighting suggests that for both the Angolan government and UNITA, the importance of their main foreign backers--the Soviet Union and South Africa--probably will increase. [REDACTED]

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We believe that Luanda has received a needed morale boost from its recent military gains. The MPLA probably believes its performance can be repeated and may even start next year's offensive earlier than usual, operating from its rear garrisons at Luena and Menongue or present forward position at Cazombo. In preparation for offensive operations next year, we believe the Angolan Army will strive for further improvement through added training and recruitment and will continue to rely heavily on Soviet and Cuban support. Although Luanda could launch another offensive similar in objectives to the present effort, there are other targets within the UNITA-held southeastern quadrant of the country that could attract government attention. Luanda may try to retake Moxico province, for example, the region Savimbi captured between late 1982 and late 1983. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's View. For Moscow, Angola's improved military performance probably will be seen as proof of the correctness of its redoubling of military support to Luanda in 1983 and in 1984. We do not believe, however, that Moscow will radically change the pattern of its involvement in Angola over the next years as long as the regime in Luanda is not in immediate danger of falling and the government anticipates an improving security situation. [REDACTED]

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In our view, more direct and extensive Soviet advisory assistance in planning and administering Angolan combat operations seems likely to continue. The Soviets no doubt will make good on Luanda's combat losses in arms and equipment, and possibly even support a modest expansion of Angolan inventories--particularly aircraft and helicopters that have proved so useful in the current offensive. Moscow probably will provide additional airdefense weapons and radars to expand the defenses in southern Angola and hope to deter South African actions by increasing the risk to its air operations. [REDACTED]

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So far, neither the Soviets nor the Cubans appear to have leaned forward to challenge the South Africans. We believe Moscow probably sees no need to intervene more directly in the conflict and risk a wider war. In our judgment, however, a threat of major proportion to Angolan

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operations or Soviet and Cuban advisers would be sufficient to prompt Soviet and Cuban pilots to take on the South Africans. [REDACTED]

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Savimbi's Prospects. Although UNITA leader Savimbi may have suffered a temporary setback during the recent offensive, we believe he is far from beaten. At a minimum, the current fighting has disabused Savimbi of the idea, expressed frequently earlier this year, that he can achieve a quick win by increasing military pressure on the government and forcing Luanda to the bargaining table. In our view, UNITA is facing a protracted conflict and finds itself more dependent than ever on Pretoria--given improving government military performance, the more active use of government superiority in airpower and firepower, and the difficulties of supporting extended guerrilla operations. [REDACTED]

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Savimbi has never had a conventional army and unless there were fundamental changes in his organization and massive reequipping and resupply, we believe he probably will be unable to challenge directly future government offensives in a standup battle which puts a premium on direct support by South Africa. Savimbi probably will have to adjust his tactics and strategy, a move which we believe he and his followers are capable of making and that probably will be urged on him by Pretoria. The insurgents may have to cut back on semiconventional operations in favor of more purely guerrilla tactics and conclude that it is better to give ground than to challenge government forces in fixed battles. Savimbi no doubt will seek improved antitank and antiaircraft weapons to compensate for government superiority. Although these weapons could make government use of its air and ground weapons superiority more tentative, we doubt that they would be enough to allow Savimbi to conduct effectively a conventional war against the government. [REDACTED]

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We do not believe Savimbi will pull back from operations in northern Angola or elsewhere in the country. The necessity of challenging government positions throughout the country, distracting Luanda from concentrating on his base area, and expanding his area of operation and recruitment probably will compel Savimbi to keep up the pressure. Savimbi probably will try to intensify guerrilla attacks throughout central and northern Angola to keep the government off balance. UNITA may even increase bombings in the cities, intensify attacks on economic and administrative targets, and redouble his efforts to knock out Angola's oil facilities in Cabinda and northern coastal regions to cut Luanda's only reliable source of foreign exchange. [REDACTED]

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South African Actions. We believe Pretoria will again move to intervene directly in the conflict if Angolan forces in coming offensives threaten to push deeper into UNITA-held stronghold in the south and closer

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to the Namibian border. Pretoria struck this year to prevent such a move and, in our view, the UNITA-held area in Angola's southeast is sufficiently important to Savimbi and Pretoria that South Africa would not hesitate to do it again, although the government will seek to avoid white casualties and the loss of its irreplaceable aircraft. [redacted]

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Apart from replenishment of UNITA's recent material losses and resort to special forces operations, there is little that Pretoria can do--short of direct intervention--to prevent a repeat of Angola's improved performance in the next offensive if UNITA chose to fight a stand up battle again. [redacted]

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South African materiel and logistic assistance to UNITA probably will increase if only to replace losses incurred during the offensive. Moreover, we believe that Pretoria will continue special forces operations in Angola--similar to this year's failed raid in Cabinda--that damage Luanda logistically or economically and enhance UNITA's reputation. [redacted]

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## ANNEX

Balance of Forces

In our judgment, the balance of forces is in Angola's favor even when South African forces are included on UNITA's side. The MPLA government has an armed strength of roughly 100,000 men in the regular army and other security forces, plus another 50,000 or more auxiliaries. In addition, there is a roughly 35,000-man Cuban military contingent, including some 27,000 combat troops, that backs the Angolan armed forces, guards rear bases, provides essential support services, and frees an equivalent number of Angolan troops for field operations. There are also some 1,200 Soviet advisers and about 500 East European personnel. [REDACTED]

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Luanda holds a better than two-to-one advantage in manpower and, although many of these troops are tied down in defense of fixed positions, Soviet and Cuban-flown transport aircraft allow fairly rapid redeployment and concentration of forces throughout the country. UNITA's troops, in contrast, move primarily on foot and movement to various regions of the country is a matter of weeks or months. [REDACTED]

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The government's traditional advantage in firepower is even more pronounced. Substantial Soviet arms deliveries in late 1983 and throughout 1984 have provided the Angolan Army with the full range of conventional weapons, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery. UNITA's troops are armed only with small arms and other light infantry weapons. The substantial growth in Angola's air strength last year--fully used for the first time in the recent offensive--provides an additional advantage for which UNITA has no effective response. [REDACTED]

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Against the government, the insurgents-- [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] have roughly 20,000 to 25,000 lightly armed but well-trained regular forces organized in battalions, most of whom are deployed in UNITA-held territory. In addition, there reportedly are 30,000 to 35,000 guerrillas operating in smaller units throughout the country, many of whom are ill-armed and ill-equipped. [REDACTED]

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In the past, UNITA has held the advantage in quality of manpower and insurgent troops have been [REDACTED] and better trained, more dedicated, and tougher than government soldiers. This advantage could be narrowing, however, as government forces improve their military skills and, as demonstrated in this year's offensive, the involvement of Soviet advisers in directing the Angolan operations compensates for previous Angolan shortcomings. [REDACTED]

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South Africa has almost 20,000 troops in northern Namibia, including Namibian territorial forces and a smaller number of South African regulars in a small strike forces equipped with tanks and armored personnel carriers. Pretoria deploys a portion of its air force forward to Namibia for operations in Angola, but even if its total air strength is counted, Angola from a purely numerical perspective has the edge, with more supersonic fighters than South Africa--90 MIG-21s and 24 MIG-23s versus 65 Mirages. Moreover, Pretoria, unlike Angola, cannot easily replace its aircraft losses. Angola's air strength is also backed by a substantial air defense system with integrated radars, surface-to-air missiles, and antiaircraft guns. This system has grown steadily since 1979, as the Soviets have delivered more weapons to Angola in response to repeated South African incursions. [REDACTED]

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Despite these apparent weaknesses, South Africa has repeatedly risked its scarce military resources in Angolan operations. Although Pretoria has probably grown more wary as Angolan strength has increased over the years, South Africa has repeatedly shown its willingness to challenge Angolan forces when necessary. In contrast, the Angolans, Soviets, and Cubans have through the years been hesitant about using their military advantages and have seldom directly challenged the South Africans, despite frequent opportunities. [REDACTED]

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